

The Reichenbach Falls Affair

by GM

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Rated PG for violence and intensity

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The persistent chirp filtered through his clouded consciousness with laser-sharp intensity; an incandescent strobe piercing an opaque night. Along with the fractional awareness came a fiery throb of agony buried deep in his chest as he drew each shuddered breath. Memory wafted lethargically through the dimly lit corridors of his recollections until he correctly identified the _beep_ as the familiar summons of his communicator.

With slow, painful effort he tugged his right arm out from under the dead weight of his body. The black Walther was still clutched in hand and shimmered a dull maroon colored from moist blood. Faint tufts of steam lifted from the pistol as it's blood-bathed metal pressed against frosty snow powder. Another few moments of concerted force of

will and the pen-communicator was extracted from his inside pocket. It was tedious work, and each movement shot tremors of pain through his arm. Frozen fingers were numb, nearly inert as they fumbled with the delicate instrument.

The strained exertion elicited condensed breath -- clouds of white puffs, which offered vague warmth to his frozen face.

Cold. He was so cold. His body involuntarily shivered from the raw exposure. It seemed the elements had even seeped into his brain and the act of thinking was almost more than he could manage. Long moments stretched into forever as he clumsily opened the channel.

"It's about time, Napoleon! Where are you? The train leaves in ten minutes!" The irked reprimand cracked like a gunshot in the frosted winter wilderness.

"Illya . . . " his voice sounded strange, harshly alien, even to himself. He cleared his parched, dry, throat. His facial muscles were so numb he could barely form words. "Illya . . . I can't make the rendezvous."

Napoleon Solo pushed himself over, his back against the crunchy snow, and stared up at the white-iced mountainside. He could no longer see the narrow road where THRUSH assassins had ambushed him, where he had leaped from the careening car only to be shot and tumble down the escarpment. THRUSH had done a professional job of putting him out of action, but perhaps he could still salvage the mission. It was the only thought, which sustained him.

"Where are you, Napoleon?" The Slavic accented voice had softened from recrimination to concern. "What's wrong?"

A slate-grey mist hovered around the edges of his vision like a surrealistic frame of clouds. Solo realized he was about to pass out again. Very soon. Probably permanently. He had to make this communication count.

"Shot . . you must . . deliver the codes . . "

Each breath produced stiletto jabs within his chest. Every word struggled in a labored effort of escape from the tightly imploded prison of seared lungs. Yet, he had to finish this final task, a last sacrifice in the name of duty.

The usually placid, calm voice of Illya Kuryakin was frayed with tension and a kind of resigned fatalism. "Where are you, Napoleon?"

Solo cleared a throat that ached from the raw bite of freezing air. He licked slivered snowflakes from chapped, cracked lips. "Nevermind," was the raspy response.

He hoped he didn't sound as terrible to Illya as he sounded to himself. It was important Illya complete their mission. Solo was experienced enough to know he was out of time and out of luck. His job now was to pass the gauntlet . . .

"Tell Hans . . this quote . . meet in Zurich . . ."

"I'm not going to Zurich," Kuryakin snapped stubbornly. "I'm coming to get you," he announced fervently.

"No!" Solo insisted with as much force as he could. "Get to Zurich . . . codes must be there . . . tonight." He drew a ragged breath, his voice trembling from the strain. "I can . . . hold out."

Abruptly he clamped his jaw shut to silence chattering teeth. The cold was penetrating, marrow-deep, from the inside as well as from the wet, glacial frost of falling snow.

"You're lying," Kuryakin shot back in impatient anger. "I can always tell, you know, it's that odd tone in your voice."

"Gee, I'll have to remember . . ."

"Now stop being so stupidly heroic and tell me where you are! Near Reichenbach?"

"Your code, Illya . . ."

Kuryakin sighed with loud exasperation. "Yes, Napoleon, I know. The quote is from Sherlock Holmes: _'There is nothing so important as trifles.'_ But I'm not going to Zurich until I find you."

Solo closed his eyes in tight concentration to keep his mental waves on the right track. He could feel his mind drifting . . . He sunk his face into the frigid snow as a sort of do-it-yourself shock treatment. Impossible. The mind still drifted. Errant images of his stubborn, irate partner intruded into his mind's eye and overwhelmed the trained concentration. The vision was so real -- the wiry Russian, wrapped in a sober, black trench coat, standing by the fleecy snowbanks and black metal train. The straw-colored hair disarrayed from agitation, the stark eyes intense and radiant chips of blue resolve.

With the vision came a haunted spectre of grief. A stab of regret -- emotionally as painful as his physical wounds. This was the end. A long distance farewell of a cherished friendship. A wave of selfish emotionalism swept over trained professionalism and the helplessness and inevitability of his situation suddenly angered him. He didn't want to die -- there was too much left undone, too much left unsaid. A hot stinging burned his eyes and he fought down the tears; just as he fought down the pain, the poignant regret the irrevocable loneliness of imminent death.

The depth of vulnerability angered him even more and the vehemence was enough to achieve a level of clarity, a last mental clutch to professionalism. He drew in deep draughts of ragged breaths to steady his nerves as well as his voice. Objective had to be maintained. As Chief Enforcement Agent his duty was to finish this mission. Forget sentiment, friendship -- remember the assignment. This had to sound confident or the astute Russian would easily see through the desperation.

"Illya . . . deliver codes . . . you can't fail . . ."

"NO! Not when you're hurt!" Kuryakin's voice cracked with uncommon emotion. The tug-of-war between loyalty to partner and fealty to duty

had fragmented the Russian's usually dispassionate calm.

Solo refused to lose the argument. "I'd hate to think . . .UNCLE lost a perfectly . . .good car . . .for nothing. Just make this . . .count . . . Illya . . . for me . . . "

The darkness that floated around him descended like a shroud. In the narrow dimension of sightlessness his other senses were suddenly more acute. The cold touched every part of his body, as if each cell was individually frozen. Between raspy breaths he could hear the snowflakes as they glided from the grey canopy sky and tickled his face. The wet shards skidded down his nose and ears and caked on his cheeks.

A black pall tugged at his consciousness. It beckoned him into comfortable oblivion. He wanted to surrender, to give in to the blackness, but a persistent, nagging voice would not leave him in peace. It refused to allow the darkness to claim him as the voice indignantly stubbornly linked him to the tangible world.

"All right, Napoleon, I'll take care of the codes, I promise. Then I'm coming after you. I don't want any arguments," Kuryakin maintained, defiantly daring his partner to oppose the decision. "Do you understand, Napoleon? Napoleon?"

The red-streaked silver pen slipped into the snow. The hot metal had melted a small indentation in the ice when it fell from the limp hand of UNCLE's Chief Enforcement Officer.

Kuryakin desperately repeated the litany of his friend's name, but the entreaties cascaded on a mind already ensconced in the solitude of sleep.

"Napoleon? "Napoleon!"

He struggled to trap a thready pulse under his unsteady fingertips. Instinctive fatalism whispered his friend had not lasted. Flaccid skin blended into the empty white landscape and the flesh felt as chill as the frozen snow. Napoleon Solo looked like death.

It had taken too long to find the downed agent. Kuryakin alternately cursed his foolhardy swashbuckler partner -- then slipped into morose speculation that he would never have the chance to vent his anger on his friend.

Precious time had been wasted as he searched the mountains. He had finally spotted the wrecked car and notified the authorities. He had scrambled down the slope and at last found the body. The end of the journey held little relief. Snow had cascaded the mountain in steady bombardment for some time and had partially obscured Solo. Illya brushed aside the fine layer of powder and saw Solo's coat glistening with still-wet blood.

For a nerve-wrenching moment Illya's chest constricted and he couldn't breath. The hardened Kuryakin was confronted with a fear he only vaguely acknowledged even to himself.

Dead.

Something inside him disintegrated when faced with the fear that his only friend would die. Only stalwart resolve enabled Kuryakin to push aside the emotions and grim hopelessness.

Kuryakin slipped out of his coat and knelt in the snow. Gently, carefully, he lifted Solo to lean against him, then wrapped the coat around the frozen agent to trap whatever body heat Solo still possessed. The movement dislodged caked ice from the dark hair and Kuryakin brushed frost off the stiff skin and colorless lips. Solo shifted and showed the first signs of consciousness.

"Napoleon?"

Lids flickered open and glazed, dark brown eyes blearily focused on the Russian. Surprise, then perplexity slowly creased Solo's face. For several moments he struggled for words.

"Funny . . .you don't look . . . like a Saint Bernard . . .well not much."

"Why don't you save your questionable wit for the nurse at the hospital," Kuryakin countered, hiding his concern behind a facade of sarcasm.

"How . . .?"

Kuryakin held up the thin pen, which was the constant companion of every UNCLE agent. "Careless of you to leave the channel open, Napoleon. I had to come shut it off for you."

"You didn't . . .make it to . . . Zurich."

A Herculean effort was needed to draw every breath, every word, and every thought. Even to struggle against the infinite weight of heavy eyelids and frozen lips cost energy he didn't feel he had left. A chill still gripped every part of him. An inner cold he had thought the harbinger of death. But he was not dead. Not yet.

The voice had brought him back. An infinitesimal flicker of warmth against the chill of death. Deep in his soul, that warmth had been sparked from the flint of friendship. Illya's voice had brought him back across the frail bridge from oblivion to life.

"Nevermind. I still managed to salvage the mission, no thanks to your clumsiness."

"I told you to finish . . . for me . . . "

Kuryakin did not mention a low-level courier filled the assignment. They could deal with the details later. Now, the mission was irrelevant. Nothing mattered to him except keeping his partner alive. Almost unconsciously he thought of another partnership that had met tragedy near Reichenbach. Illya hoped he would witness the resurrection of his friend, just as Doctor Watson had in THE FINAL PROBLEM. He prayed there would be nothing final here today.

"That is why I came." His voice cracked with a raw chill as cold as the snow. "For you."

Solo's blue lips twitched into a shivering smile. His hand onto Illya's in a icy clutch.

The ungainly warble of a siren echoed eerily against the rugged majesty of the Alps. It resounded against the rocks and vaguely penetrated across the muffled cushion of snow.

"The Cavalry is upon us," Kuryakin announced.

Anxiety scraped on the uneven voice. The announcement held little reassurance. Napoleon clung to the precariously narrow path of life with only fingertips. Was there a way to save him from the yawning chasm of eternity? Kuryakin wanted to plead for Napoleon to hang on, to use every bit of strength to keep living. But Illya's own fears kept him from putting his anguish into words.

"Too . . .late . . ."

Kuryakin shivered from a raw fear that froze his very soul.

Solo's deep voice once more grated out the hard-won message. "Too late . . .Cavalry's already here . . ." He tapped Kuryakin's chest. "You . . ." he whispered as his eyes closed and his head dropped onto Kuryakin's arm.

The Russian released the breath he had been holding. His head shook in resignation and dusted both of them with a tiny snow flurry. Shaking fingers found a weak pulse on Solo's neck. Part of the strangling chill within him had thawed at Solo's comment, which was Napoleon's inimitable offer of thanks, not surrender.

Illya drew a deep, cold, bracing breath of raw mountain air. He was now reassured. Solo clung too staunchly to life to let go now. The Russian agent wondered how he had ever doubted Solo's stubborn survival abilities. There should never have been any doubt.

Thus, when the ambulance attendants scurried down the embankment, the rescue was almost anti-climactic. The Russian huddled impatiently in the snow, his partner wrapped protectively in his arms. The desperate fear of loss was gone from Kuryakin's pale face. Death was once more postponed by the stubborn will of two UNCLE agents who, together, refused to give in too easily to any foe.

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THE END

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End
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